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USIB-D-28.5/5
28 August 1974

UNITED STATES INTELLIGENCE BOARD

MEMORANDUM FOR USIB PRINCIPALS

SUBJECT : An Intelligence Alert System

1. With all the changes we have made in our production and reporting systems, there still remains a major gap: there is no established means by which we can with the proper emphasis formally alert the national policy-maker to a problem which is about to confront him. These matters are covered in routine current intelligence reporting but they usually are not presented in a way that makes the reader know that the Community is warning him that X is about to happen.

2. To fill this gap we propose a new, or at least relabeled, art form--the "Alerting Memorandum". By this we have in mind an inter-agency memorandum sent by the DCI, speaking for the Community, to the membership of WSAG. Its purpose would be to put WSAG formally on notice that the Community sees the possibility of a major problem, to inform it of the steps taken to improve intelligence collection, and, if appropriate, to recommend that WSAG meet on the problem. Should a major crisis occur, the absence of such a memorandum would provide genuine evidence that an intelligence failure had occurred, however much raw reporting might have been disseminated. Its existence would demonstrate that, whatever the nuances of reporting and interpretation, we had foreseen the possibility and so informed our masters. A (notional) sample is attached.

3. It should be emphasized that the Alerting Memorandum would be issued to call attention to the potential dangers of an unfolding situation as early as possible in the unfolding process. We would not wait until these undesirable outcomes had become probable. Thus we should have warned of the potentials in a new Cyprus crisis early in July without specific evidence that the Greeks intended to overthrow Makarios.

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SECRET

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By waiting for evidence which, when it came, was quickly contradicted we allowed what might have been a clear warning message to become fuzzy and muted. It is easier to recognize a dangerous situation than to forecast the specific ways in which it might develop.

4. Because this is so, we must be especially careful not to debase the currency by issuing frequent or protective memoranda. First, we must alert only on those matters that should engage WSAG. Second, we must balance importance and probability. We should be prepared to alert WSAG to the possibility of a grave crisis, and accept the brickbats that come with crying wolf. We should resist, however, the temptation to alert on lesser matters, and accept the unpleasant reality that occasionally our consumers will be surprised.

5. Any USIB member or NIO could propose to the DCI the issuance of an Alerting Memorandum. If the DCI concurred, he would charge the responsible NIO with getting the memorandum prepared, consulting among the USIB agencies to the extent feasible. He would at the same time put into effect appropriate collection measures and alerts. Finally, he would send the Alerting Memorandum to the members of WSAG with a recommendation that WSAG meet and consider contingency plans.

6. The issuance of an Alerting Memorandum would take place entirely within existing organizations and procedures. It would require no new mechanisms, personnel, or funds. It would simply be a way for the Community to ensure that it focuses its attention, and that of the policy officer, on threatening situations.

7. I suggest that we discuss this proposal at an early meeting of USIB.

(signed)
W. E. Colby
Chairman

Attachment: a/s

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Next 2 Page(s) In Document Denied